

Amendment to Claims:

1. (Previously Presented) A method for handling items potentially contaminated with a pathogenic agent comprising:

sorting the potentially contaminated items in an enclosure to separate items which are unsuited to treatment with a first decontaminant from remaining potentially contaminated items;

treating at least a portion of the sorted items with the first decontaminant capable of destroying the pathogenic agent; and

treating the enclosure with a second decontaminant.

2. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein the first decontaminant includes an oxidizing gas.

3. (Original) The method of claim 2, wherein the oxidizing gas includes ethylene oxide.

4. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein the second decontaminant includes an antimicrobial vapor.

5. (Original) The method of claim 4, wherein the antimicrobial vapor includes hydrogen peroxide.

6. (Previously Presented) A method for handling items potentially contaminated with a pathogenic agent comprising:

sorting the potentially contaminated items in an enclosure;

thereafter, treating at least a portion of the sorted items with a first decontaminant capable of destroying the pathogenic agent in a chamber which is selectively connected with the enclosure and is isolatable from the enclosure; and

treating the enclosure with a second decontaminant.

7. (Original) The method of claim 6, further including, prior to the step of treating at least a portion of the items with a first decontaminant:

transporting the at least a portion of the items from the enclosure to the chamber connected with the enclosure; and

5 closing off the chamber from the enclosure.

8. (Original) The method of claim 1, further including, prior to the step of sorting:

introducing the items to the enclosure in a sealed container.

9. (Original) The system of claim 8, wherein the step of introducing the items to the enclosure in the sealed container includes:

5 connecting the sealed container containing the items with an interlock which selectively provides access to the enclosure while forming a seal between the container and the interlock;

with the container connected to the interlock, opening the container to the enclosure; and

introducing the items to the enclosure from the container.

10. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein the enclosure is airtight or is operated under a negative pressure.

11. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein the step of sorting includes:

using manipulators to sort the items; and

5 placing the items to be decontaminated with the first decontaminant in a basket.

12. (Original) The method of claim 1, further including:

loading the at least a portion of the items into a basket;

transporting the basket into the chamber of a sterilizer connected with the enclosure;

5 evacuating the sterilizer chamber; and

introducing gaseous sterilant to the chamber, the items being kept in the sterilizer for a sufficient time to decontaminate the items.

13. (Original) The method of claim 12, further including, after the introducing step:

aerating the chamber to remove residual sterilant.

14. (Original) The method of claim 1, further including, within the enclosure, examining at least a portion of the items with an x-ray machine.

15. (Original) The method of claim 1, wherein the items include mailed items.

16. (Original) The method of claim 15, further including:
scanning a document in the mail with a scanning device within the enclosure to generate a scanned image; and
transmitting the scanned image to a location outside the enclosure.

17. (Original) The method of claim 1, further including:
employing at least one detector capable of detecting at least one pathogenic agent when present at a detectable level within the enclosure.

18. (Original) The method of claim 17, further including:
tailoring at least one of the step of treating the enclosure with a second decontaminant and the step of treating at least a portion of the sorted items with a first decontaminant according to at least one of a type of pathogenic agent detected and a level 5 of the pathogenic agent detected to improve the effectiveness of the at least one step.

19-30. (Cancelled)

31. (Currently Amended) A method for handling items potentially contaminated with a pathogenic agent comprising:
(a) transporting the items in a sealed container;
(b) connecting the sealed container to an isolated enclosure in an airtight 5 manner;

(c) using manipulators, opening the container to an interior of the enclosure, removing the items from the container into the enclosure, and sorting the items within the isolated enclosure;

10 (d) opening an outlet door between the isolated enclosure and an isolated region;

(e) moving at least a portion of the sorted items through the outlet door and the isolated region into a sealable decontamination chamber;

(f) sealing the decontamination chamber from the enclosure;

15 (g) treating the portion of the sorted items in the decontamination chamber with a first decontaminant capable of destroying the pathogenic agent;

(h) treating the enclosure with a second decontaminant; and

(i) while the portion of the sorted items is being treated in the decontamination chamber, receiving and sorting additional items in the isolated enclosure.

32. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 31, further including:

5 after treating the portion of the sorted items in the decontamination chamber, removing the treated items directly to atmosphere without going through the enclosure.

33. (Cancelled).

34. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 33, wherein the enclosure is treated with the second decontaminant after the items have been removed.

35. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 33, wherein treating the portion of the sorted items in the decontamination chamber includes:

5 evacuating the decontamination chamber;

introducing gaseous ethylene oxide;

removing the ethylene oxide from the decontamination chamber; and

aerating the sorted items in the decontamination chamber to remove absorbed ethylene oxide.

36. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 35, wherein the second decontaminant used to treat the enclosure includes hydrogen peroxide vapor.

37. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1, wherein the step of treating the enclosure with the second decontaminant is performed after the items have been removed from the enclosure.

38. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 1 wherein the sorting step is performed prior to treating the sorted items.

39. (Previously Presented) The method of claim 6, wherein the sorting step sorts items between items which are not suited to treatment by the first decontaminant and items which are suited for treatment by the first decontaminant.